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THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL IDEALS OF ISRAEL

BY HERBERT L. WILLETT

AN OUTLINE BIBLE-STUDY COURSE OF THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

At no time in the history of the world has the attention of Christian people been drawn so critically and sympathetically to the teaching of Jesus and the partial failure of Christian people to incorporate the principles of Jesus into social and individual life.

The principles and teaching of Jesus were definitely related to the religious and social ideals which he inherited from his Hebrew ancestors and from his spiritual predecessors the prophets. There is no better way of emphasizing and assimilating the teaching of Jesus than by the study of the work of the prophets. It is therefore with great satisfaction that this course of study is presented to the readers of the BIBLICAL WORLD.

The course is published also in nine leaflets issued on the 15th of each month from September, 1915, to June, 1916. To all members of the AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE enrolling for this course, these leaflets are sent without charge. The membership fee is \$0.50, plus 4 cents for postage. The amount may be sent to the headquarters of the Institute at the University of Chicago. Leaders of classes will find suggestions for their special work in the BIBLICAL WORLD beginning with the October issue.

INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION OF THE TITLE

The modern student of the Bible, in the effort to understand its content and message, seeks to avail himself of the aid offered by the study of religious and social conditions among the peoples who formed the environment of the biblical preachers and writers.

The most important of these nations, from the point of view of its influence upon our own ethical and spiritual ideas, and upon the higher life of the world at large, was the Hebrew people.

The present series of studies concerns itself with the prevailing conceptions of religion and morals among the Hebrews during the classic period of their history.

SCOPE OF THE COURSE

The course will consist of ten monthly studies, covering the centuries in which Israel passed through its most eventful stages of growth and decline, and dealing with the men who most effectively shaped the curve of its higher life.

It is not the purpose of the course to present an exhaustive study of the religion and morals of Israel. But the object is to provide the student with the means for a first-hand acquaintance with the work of the great moral leaders whose influence was most significant in forming the ideals of that nation and the wider world.

In the attainment of this object, sufficient reading from the Bible will be required to illustrate the leading ideals and purposes of each one of these religious teachers of ancient Israel. A definite section of the Bible will be designated for daily study. This method is not intended to be inflexible, however. If the student prefers, the division into days may be ignored.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, upon which these studies are based, is a collection of documents comprising the total surviving literature of the Hebrew nation during the period when the Hebrew language was a living speech.

Its literature includes the records of individual and national experiences, public discourses, national laws and institutes, meditations upon the important problems of life, hymns and lyrics, and apocalyptic visions.

The writings of the Old Testament represent many periods of Israel's history, and many points of view. But from them the student is able to secure a fairly consistent idea of the development of religion and ethics in the most important nation of antiquity.

ISRAEL AS A NATION

The Hebrews were a branch of the great Semitic race, which included such nations as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Arabs, Aramaeans, and Phoenicians.

Their ancestors migrated from the region of the Euphrates to the Mediterranean coastland some fifteen hundred years or more before Christ, and after varied experiences in Canaan, Egypt, and the southern desert, they became the dominant race in the region later known as Palestine.

Here for seven centuries, beginning about 1200 B.C., they flourished, first as a united people, then broken into two divisions, north and south; and with alternations of success and failure, they contended with neighboring nations, such as the Philistines, Syrians, Assyrians, and Babylonians.

In later centuries, during the dominance of Persian, Greek, and Roman power, they were reduced in territory and numbers to a provincial condition,

and finally, in the first century A.D., the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans put an end to Jewish nationality.

THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

But although the political fortunes of Israel were never brilliant for more than brief periods, and at last came to tragic failure, the contributions made by this people to ethics and religion were among the most remarkable known to history.

In this small country, in the midst of the varied experiences of war and peace, prosperity and distress, pastoral, agricultural, and urban life, independence and subjection, there were developed such ideals of conduct and such conceptions of the infinite as have given ancient Israel the right to a unique position as a spiritual teacher of the races.

Gradually emerging in their national life there appeared the principles of reverence for a God of ethical character, imageless and holy; the employment of ritual not as an end but as a means of moral excellence; obedience to the ideals of truth, honesty, purity, and justice, as the qualities of Deity and as essential to his approval; and the obligations of the individual, the family, the community, and the nation to exhibit the character approved by the divine patron and ruler.

RELATION OF THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL TO ITS HISTORY

It is natural that the religion of any people should be strongly influenced by the national environment and experience. Locality, climate, ancestral tendencies, and political fortunes are all important factors in determining the character of the national faith.

Israel was no exception to this rule, but rather one of its most conspicuous illustrations. History and religion reacted upon each other in a remarkable manner among those dwellers in the uplands of Palestine. Contact with other clans and nations, as the result of war or commerce, brought the contagion of idolatry and immorality, which roused the fierce opposition of moral leaders, and wrought out for Israel an ethical program of unique character.

It is impossible to form an intelligent opinion regarding the religion of Israel, which formed the background of early Christianity, without a competent knowledge of Hebrew history. The varying political fortunes of the nation affected profoundly its ethical and religious condition. It is essential, therefore, that the present series of studies should include some adequate review of the history.

THE NEED OF PROPHETS

Perhaps the most unique feature of Israel's religious life was the presence and influence of prophecy—a term used to describe the preaching of righteousness by a group of men who in successive periods assumed the

task of moral leadership, and interpreted to the nation the principles of morality and religion.

Prophets were not unknown in other lands. Outside of Israel there were men who corresponded in some degree to these moral leaders. But nowhere else did the prophetic order attain the significance and influence which it exhibited among the Hebrews. To this fact is due the unique place which Israel reached among the spiritual forces of history.

The prophet was not the only interpreter of religion in Israel. The priests ministered at the sanctuaries, interpreted oracles, and taught the national institutes. The wise men gave instruction regarding the problems of life, and counseled those who resorted to them for practical advice. But the prophets were the vital force in the stimulation of Israel's better life, and their influence was felt profoundly throughout the history.

PROPHETIC ACTIVITIES

The prophets did not belong to any particular clan or tribe, like the priests. They were men who were moved by the circumstances of their lives and by the spirit of God to undertake the work of protest, instruction, and reform.

Most of them were preachers, finding their audiences when and where they could, and making known the will of the national God as they understood it.

They traveled about from place to place, like Samuel, or remained in a single city, like Isaiah. They illustrated their messages with stories from the past experiences of the nation, or the lives of its ancestral heroes.

On some occasions they made clearer their meaning by symbolic acts, or by sympathetic works of healing.

They endeavored to improve the moral character of the communities in which they resided, and to purify the religious conditions of their age. Their ideals were better social relations, the approval of the divine Ruler of the state, and a more glorious future for the nation.

PROPHETIC WRITINGS

The prophets preached the national faith. They were the interpreters of the divine will. Some of them also wrote down their messages, as means of reaching wider communities, or providing a record for public instruction. Thus there came to be collections of prophetic writings. These writings are among the most important portions of the Old Testament, and are known as the prophetic books. One section of them includes the prophetic records of national experience, the story of the past, as it was told by these preachers of righteousness. Among such books are Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

The other group of prophetic books comprises such as bear the names of prophets, and contain the messages which have been preserved to us

from those preachers. Among such are Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah.

RELATION TO EARLY CHRISTIANITY

To all students of the New Testament the Hebrew Scriptures are of profound importance, and particularly the prophetic writings. Only through a competent acquaintance with them are the conditions and ideals of the Christian society to be understood.

Jesus himself grew up in the atmosphere of the great prophets, and nourished his religious life upon their utterances. His first interpreters appealed to the prophetic oracles as the final authority in their vindication of his mission.

By the Christian church the religious and social ideals of the prophets of Israel were gathered up and, under the leadership of Jesus and the apostles, carried to their highest value. The gospel is the completion and fulfilment of prophetic hopes.

THE PURPOSE OF THESE STUDIES

It is the aim of this series of studies:

1. To provide the student with some competent knowledge of the literature of the Old Testament, particularly its Prophetic portions.
2. To afford a means of understanding the most important portions of Hebrew History.
3. To disclose the intimate relations between that history and the religious life which it produced.
4. To make clear the leading religious and social ideals of the Hebrews, the nation that has exercised a larger influence upon the ethics and religion of the world than any other people of antiquity.
5. To show the relationship between these teachings and those of early Christianity.
6. To disclose the permanent elements in the teachings of the moral leaders of Israel, and their value for every age and all mankind.

STUDY I

EARLY HEBREW IDEALS—MOSES, SAMUEL, ELIJAH

First day.—§ 1. *Migration of Abram (Abraham):* Gen. 12:1-9. Note that according to this passage the patriarchal traditions of the Hebrews held that their ancestors migrated from the region of Southern Babylonia, in obedience to the divine command. They came into Canaan (Palestine), and lived as unsettled clans in various parts of the land.

Second day.—§ 2. *Israel's migration to Egypt:* Gen. 42:1, 2; 43:1, 2; chaps 37-41; 46:29-34; 47:1-12. The three generations of patriarchs, Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob, lived in Canaan, their clans growing in numbers and wealth. Famine at length compelled the family of Jacob to secure provisions from Egypt. Read Gen. 42:1, 2; 43:1, 2. Providential events had brought Joseph, the favorite son, into power in Egypt. Read Gen., chaps. 37-41. By his favor the Hebrews were brought thither. Read Gen. 46:29-34; 47:1-12.

Third day.—§ 3. *The birth of Moses:* Exod. 1:1-14; 2:1-10. Time passed. The new dynasty in Egypt was unfavorable to foreigners. The Hebrews increased, in spite of repressive measures. Moses was born, and strangely preserved from death. Read the passage cited for the day.

Fourth day.—§ 4. *The exodus from Egypt:* Exod. 12:37-42; 13:17-22; also 2:11-22; chaps. 7-12; 14, 15:1-21. Exod. 2:11-22 tells us that Moses, prematurely attempting the deliverance of his people, was compelled to leave Egypt. His life in Midian was that of a shepherd. The sign of the burning bush was accepted as a summons to assist his people. The name of Jehovah was made known. Moses returned to Egypt. The misfortunes of Egypt, usually called the plagues, are related in Exod., chaps. 7-12, and the departure of the Israelites from Egypt in chap. 14, followed by the Song by the Sea in chap. 15:1-21.

Fifth day.—§ 5. *Early organization of Israel:* Exod. 18:1-27. In Exod. 18:1-27 we read of the journey of Israel into the desert, and the visit of Moses to his Midianite father-in-law, whose wise advice regarding organization and simple courts of justice was the solution of the immediate problem of law and order. It shows at this stage Midianite influence on Israel's life.

Sixth day.—§ 6. *An early code of Hebrew laws:* Exod. 20:1-17; 34:10-28; Deut. 5:6-21. All nations have had bodies of laws, which grew out of inheritance from the past, or from the organization of custom into law. The "Ten Words," or "Ten commandments" (read in Exod. 20:1-17), constitute such a code. They are evidently quite old, and were traditionally associated with the name of Moses. The earliest form is found in Exod. 34:10-28. The more common form is that given in the text, and, with slight modifications, in Deut. 5:6-21. Read these passages and note the differences. It was a code of law adapted to the needs of a people living a simple nomadic or agricultural life. But re-read carefully and note that the ethical and religious tone is very high, and as a brief statement of fundamental principles of conduct, it has come to wide, almost universal acceptance.

Seventh day.—§ 7. *Other early Hebrew laws:* Exod., chaps. 20-23, especially 21:1-36. An excellent idea of the early standards of conduct set up among the Hebrews may be gained from Exod., chaps. 20-23, together with a supplementary document in Exod., chap. 34. A part of this material is taken for the present study. Exod. 20:24-26 illustrates the ideas of simplicity; 21:2-11, 20, 21-24, kindness to servants and to strangers; 21:15, 17; 22:28, reverence; 21:18, 19, 26, 27, 33, 34; 22:5, 6, the necessity for compensation in cases of injury, and other principles. Most of all, this group of laws makes clear the fact that an equivalent must be exacted for all injuries. It modified the severity of inflicting death for all offenses, as had some ancient codes, and demanded only an equivalent. Note Exod. 21:12, 23-25. This was a long step toward the law of forgiveness enumerated by Jesus as given in Matt. 5:38-42.

Eighth day.—§ 8. *The promise of a line of prophets:* Deut. 18:9-22. In the Book of Deuteronomy many traditions regarding Moses' character and teaching are preserved. One of these relates to the appearance of a prophet from time to time as an interpreter of the will of God. Read Deut. 18:9-22. It was the hope that God would not leave himself without a witness among the people. The line of prophets was in a true sense the fulfilment of this promise, though the popular interpretation of the passage referred it to some prophet who was to arise in the distant future. Read John 1:21; 7:40.

Ninth Day.—§ 9. *The character of Moses:* Exod. 32:7-35; Num. 12:3; Deut. 34:7, 10-12. Read the first passage and note that Moses is represented as pleading the cause of the nation, after its relapse into idolatry. Jehovah, angry with Israel, is threatening to destroy the people, and offers to make Moses the head of another and better nation. With true generosity and noble disinterestedness, Moses begs that the divine forgiveness be extended. Note the passionate earnestness of his cry to Jehovah in vs. 32. The striking and primitive description of the divine anger, and the lofty character of Moses' devotion, make this one of the most notable of commentaries on the popular regard in which Moses was held. For further light on this point read Num. 12:3 and Deut. 34:7, 10-12.

Tenth day.—§ 10. *The death of Moses:* Deut. 34:1-12. Though not permitted, as this passage tells us, to enter Canaan with his people, Moses was given the privilege of seeing the future home of Israel from the mountain heights of Nebo. The mystery of his death and burial added to the regard in which he was held by the people. To him, as Israel's first lawgiver, it became the custom to attribute all the laws of the nation, and even to this day the first five books of the Old Testament bear in their titles the mark of this custom.

Eleventh day.—§ 11. *Israel's occupation of Canaan:* Judg. 1:1-36. After the death of Moses, the tribes of Israel began their efforts to obtain a footing in Canaan. Of this period there are two narratives, the older one in Judg., chaps. 1, 2, and the later in the Book of Joshua. According to the record in Judges which is largely from prophetic sources, the various tribes acted independently, and secured whatever portions of the central mountain region they could obtain. In this effort they were only partially successful, considerable districts remaining in the hands of the Canaanites. But the people secured a foothold, and gradually dominated the entire country.

Twelfth day.—§ 12. *The Judges:* Judg. 2:1-23; 17:6; 21:25. Read the passages. The first period of Israel's history in Canaan was one of warfare, struggle, lack of organization, and absence of any political or religious coherence. Judg. 17:6 and 21:25 give the keynote: "There was no king in Israel in those days, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes." In the emergency there arose volunteer leaders, in the various parts of the land where there was danger. These men were called judges, though their functions were rather military than judicial. The Book of Judges is the record of some of their achievements, and of other events which illustrate the rude character of the age.

Thirteenth day.—§ 13. *Gideon's victory:* Judg. 7:1-25. Of the judges mentioned in this book, some of the most important were Deborah and Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. The story of Gideon illustrates the character of the services rendered by such leaders. Read the narrative beginning in chap.

6, and note how the fortunes of Israel were regarded as shaped by the divine will, through providential events. This principle is characteristic of all the narratives of the book.

Fourteenth day.—§ 14. *The birth of Samuel:* I Sam. 1:1-28; chap. 2. The Books of Samuel are among the most important of the prophetic records of Israel. Read the first passage cited and note that in this narrative the parents of Samuel, pious Ephraimites, are given the long-desired child. The sanctuary, probably one of many, was at Shiloh. The place of priesthood, sacrifices, and vows in the life of the people is interesting. Hannah's hymn of rejoicing in chap. 2 is a beautiful Hebrew poem from an early date.

Fifteenth day.—§ 15. *Samuel's call:* I Sam. 2:12-36; 3:1-21. The family of Eli, the priest, was threatened with extinction because of its unworthy conduct (2:12-36). Samuel, reared at the sanctuary in Shiloh, becomes conscious of his growing duty and responsibility. The awakening of his nature to the divine purpose for him is beautifully represented in the account of his night summons, and the warning message conveyed to him. Read I Sam. 3:1-21. His growing leadership is recognized by the people.

[Study I will be completed in October and Suggestions to leaders of classes will be published in that number.]